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ABSTRACT

Happy Sticks, the name given to the reinforcement system used in a classroom of pre-school autisitc children, is presented. Happy Sticks are decorated tongue depressors serving as token rewards; Happy Bags, or pouches are worn by the children around their necks to hold the earned Happy Sticks. Reinforcement can be immediate and occur throughout all activities with minimal distraction. Happy Sticks are earned for appropriate behaviors and are exchanged intermittently for food rewards. Inappropriate behavior results in the child losing his/her Happy Bag, which is removed by the teacher and the child is ignored while other children behaving appropriately receive increased reinforcement, including Happy Sticks. Once the inappropriate behavior stops, the Happy Bag is given back to the child. The teacher may also remove a Happy Stick from a child's pouch for another inappropriate, but perhaps less disruptive behavior. Happy Sticks are counted frequently throughout activity sessions by the children who receive a food reward regardless of the number of sticks earned. The system helps maintain a positive classroom environment, and the children enjoy it. (Author)

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A Unique Method for Classroom Control: Happy Sticks

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Happy Sticks are the name given to the reinforcement system used in this classroom of pre-school autistic children. A Happy Stick is a decorated tongue depressor and serves as the token reward. The children wear pouches, or Happy Bags, around their necks which hold the earned Happy Sticks. This way, reinforcement can be immediate and occur throughout all activities with minimal distraction. Happy Sticks are earned for appropriate behaviors and are exchanged, intermittently, for food rewards. Inappropriate behavior results in the child losing his/her Happy Bag, which is removed by the teacher. The child is ignored while other children behaving appropriately receive increased reinforcement, including Happy Sticks. Once the inappropriate behavior stops, the Happy Bag is given back to the child. The teacher may also remove a Happy Stick from a child's pouch for another inappropriate, but perhaps less disruptive behavior. Happy Sticks are counted frequently throughout activity sessions. The children count their earned sticks and receive a food reward regardless of the number of sticks earned. This system helps maintain a positive classroom environment. The children thrive on it.

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A Unique Method for Classroom Control
Happy Sticks

The purpose of this paper will be to discuss a system of behavior management used in my classroom. I teach the pre-school level children in the B.L.L.D. Program (Behavior, Language and Learning Disordered) for the Macomb Intermediate School District. There are 10 children in the class - 9 boys and 1 girl ages 4-6. Children placed in this classroom must exhibit disorders in behavior, language and learning. This includes the autistic population.

The class is staffed by one teacher and two full time instructional aides. These para-professionals work directly with the children both individually and in small groups during work sessions. A lunch aide is in the room for an hour and a half in the middle of the day so that at all times, there are two adults present. Each child sees the language therapist daily and three of the children see the occupational therapist weekly.

The physical layout of the classroom is an important factor which contributes to behavior management in addition to the system I will be discussing. Through the use of large dividers placed strategically in the room, we are able to divide the room into segments, or activity centers, which eliminates distraction as much as possible.

The scheduling of daily activities is another factor which has significant bearing on managing behavior. We want to avoid a child becoming bored or frustrated, which could lead to a behavior problem, so activities are scheduled at 5 minute intervals during

our work sessions to accommodate short attention spans and low thresholds of interest and frustration. We build in motivation in the scheduling of work sessions as we alternate difficult activities with liked activities, table and floor activities, academic and social activities, etc. The following is a schedule of a "typical day":

8:45	- 9:00	AM	Arrival of children-toileting
9:00	- 9:20		Unstructured play time
9:20	- 9:30		Group Time-good mornings,happy !
9:30	- 10:00		Work Session
10:00	- 10:15		Playroom
10:15	- 10:45		Work Session
10:45	- 11:00		Creative - movement and music
11:00	- 11:20		Group Language lesson.
11:20	- 12:00		Lunch
12:00	- 12:20	PM	Unstructured play time
12:20	- 12:40		Story or movie
12:40	- 1:10		Gym
1:10	- 1:30		Quiet time
1:30	- 1:45		Snack
1:45	- 2:10		Art activity
2:10	- 2:30		Prepare for busses, home

We have attempted to alternate each block of time as well as the activities within the block. (liked - difficult, etc.)

In my classroom, we work on skills from 6 basic curriculum areas: language, pre-academic or academic, motor, social, creative and perceptual. Abilities of the children vary considerably both within each child and between the children. Eight of the children are verbal and 2 are non-verbal. The major thrust throughout all activities is language skill development. We work on many "readiness" type activities keeping in mind developmental levels and sequence. One child in the class is able to read phonetically although he has no comprehension. All of the children have perceptual problems and a great deal of difficulty in fine motor tasks. Gross motor skills tests out as the highest skill area for the class as a whole. Awareness and interaction with one another is minimal.

In the large area of behaviors, our goal is to increase those basic behaviors conducive to learning - eye contact, sitting and attending, and decrease those that are disruptive or inappropriate. In addition, I feel these children must become responsible for

their behavior and learn ways to control their own behavior. There are 4 areas of behaviors one might observe in the classroom:

1. Manipulative or attention-getting;
2. Self-stimulating;
3. Non-compliance;
4. Strange or bizarre.

None of these particular children display aggressive behavior toward one another.

Given the functional level of this group of children and the severe learning and behavior problems, I saw the need for a strong and structured management system that would help establish control, increase motivation and provide consistency. I felt it was essential to provide a system that would give the children strong, immediate feedback without overloading them with food rewards. What I set up and devised was a tangible token system which was implemented several months into the school year. I had begun this system two years ago with an older group of children and it now seemed appropriate for the pre-schoolers. The raw materials required are: tongue depressers, pouches and aprons. I chose to use tongue depressers for the token rewards because they are cheap, durable and easy to handle. By coloring the tips of each with different colored magic markers and drawing a smiling face on each they began to look like something a child might be attracted to. I decided to call these "happy sticks" because if a child earned one, we would both feel happy. A convenient place to hold the

happy sticks was needed -- someplace on the child and as minimally distracting as possible. The answer was "happy bags" -- small pouches to be worn around the neck, fastened together with velcro. At first the bags were made of felt but within two months they were all but destroyed from sucking, pulling and picking. A strong woven fabric turned out to be the best choice, for looks as well as durability. Each child wore a different colored bag with the ribbon matched to the fabric and a special applique in front. Ribbons were stitched to the pouches so they could be worn around the neck. Myself and the aides each wore aprons sectioned off to hold the sticks, food rewards and tissue -- a necessity in a pre-school classroom.

In the beginning of the year we had determined one behavior for each child to be increased and decreased, and with the implementation of happy sticks, we continued to work on the same behaviors. In introducing the concept to the children, I explained how if they worked hard, they would earn happy sticks, and if they had happy sticks in their bags, they may exchange them for food rewards. We would be rewarding appropriate behavior with social, physical, activity, as well as the token rewards. When giving a child a happy stick we would pair it with verbal and physical praise. How often one would give a happy stick was a decision made on the spot, based on the need at the time. There was no set interval, although happy sticks were given every three to five minutes. In the beginning, we were rewarding with happy sticks much more frequently than after several months into the system.

I also explained to each child that if they engaged in that negative behavior we wanted to decrease, they would lose their happy bag. It would be removed and worn by the adult present. They were told that as soon as they would stop that negative behavior and do the appropriate behavior, they would be able to wear their happy bag again and earn sticks. A child not wearing their happy bag is ignored by all adults in the room until the bag is earned back. When a child has lost their happy bag, we increase the praise and rewarding of happy sticks to those behaving appropriately. We may also decide at this time to count happy sticks. This most often brings back the inappropriate child. Happy sticks are counted by each child and exchanged for a food reward, regardless of how many sticks the child has earned. The counting of the sticks are at intermittent intervals, determined by the activities or behaviors occuring at the time.

There are also times when a child will lose a happy stick and not the bag. This is done for another behavior that is occuring at the time and is disruptive and cannot be ignored. This gives the teacher a greater degree of control in managing other disruptive behaviors. Loss of a happy bag is the major behavior intervention used in the classroom.

All of the children have made many gains both behaviorally and academically, much of which we attribute to the strength of this system. Some more observable changes have been: 1) Increased attention during activities both structured and unstructured. 2) Increased compliance. 3) Reduction of many

off-task behaviors. The children seem to truly enjoy wearing their happy bags and most definitely do not like to lose them. The happy bags and happy sticks have also helped the children in identifying colors, counting, number concepts and one to one relationships. The system has proven easy to share with the para-professionals, therapists and substitutes as well.

In general, we have found the happy bag system to be a very strong motivator which allows the adults in the room to establish and maintain control of behavior. And, most important, we have seen the children become increasingly in control of their own behavior.

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